



The Times

Community has role in parolees' rehab

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PRINCETON BOROUGH - Prison does only part of the job of rehabilitating a lawbreaker. The community has to step in afterward to help ensure that the parolee can live up to society's expectations.

Local officials who want to help former convicts make the transition to law-abiding behavior discussed ways to help them find jobs, homes and stable lives, with an emphasis on faith-based aid and the avoidance of gangs, at a conference earlier this month at Princeton University.

Trenton Mayor Douglas H. Palmer said that parolees do not have good options when their prison terms end. His office sponsored the "Pathways Home" conference along with the state Parole Board and the university's Policy Institute for the Region at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.

"People who are arrested are going to come out," Palmer said. "Certainly, you want to have programs that will assist them if they're out."

Palmer said faith-based groups and other social service organizations can work together to provide the skills and environment to give parolees better options than returning to gangs.

The event featured a speech by retired state Superior Court Judge John D'Amico, chairman of the parole board. D'Amico said long-term success of such conferences depends on volunteers working together after the event.

Roughly 340 of Mercer County's 442 parolees live in Trenton, D'Amico said.

"How we deal with their problems and issues is going to determine what kind of community Trenton will be," he said.

He said those who commit crimes may come from dysfunctional families. "What has replaced the dysfunctional family? The gang," he said.

He pointed to faith-based organizations as being particularly well-suited to changing the attitudes of parolees, who "may have had a church experience growing up and they have gotten away from those roots," he said.

State Personnel Commissioner Rolando Torres Jr. asked volunteers and activists to lobby state legislators to make changes in the hurdles parolees face on re-entering the community.

Torres said some legal barriers block convicts from getting driver's licenses or certificates for some jobs. "It should be a case-by-case assessment," he said.

The event was beneficial to community groups, according to Aula Sumbry, executive director of Insight Inc., a Trenton faith-based organization that helps parolees re-enter the community.

"The crime problem is not just a social problem, it's a spiritual problem," Sumbry said.

His organization provides group meetings to discuss skills needed to readjust, as well as mentors and job-recruiting opportunities. It draws on different faiths.

He said the conference makes a practical difference because it connects different organizations that can help parolees, such as allowing community groups to bring clients to state-sponsored job fairs, and encourages task forces to follow up on recommendations made at the conference.

This is the fifth such conference, with events held in Atlantic City, Camden, Newark and Paterson since May 2004. NOTE:

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